The Women's Movement

By Joan Didion

***The New York Times Book Review*, July 30, 1972, Section BR, Page 1**

To make an omelette you need not only those broken eggs but someone “oppressed” to break them: every revolutionist is presumed to under stand that, and also every woman, which either does or does not make 51 per cent of the population of the United States a potentially revolutionary class. The creation of this revolutionary class was from the virtual beginning the “idea” of the women's movement, and the tendency for popular discussion of the movement still to center around day care centers is yet another instance of that studied resistance to the possibility of political ideas which characterizes national life.

“The new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality,” the feminist theorist Shulamith Firestone announced flatly in 1970. “It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history.” This was scarcely a statement of purpose any one could find cryptic, and it was scarcely the only statement of its kind in the literature of the movement. Nonetheless, in 1972, in a “special issue” on women, Time was still musing genially that the movement might well succeed in bringing about “fewer diapers and more Dante.”

That was a very pretty image, the idle ladies sitting in the gazebo and murmuring *lasciate ogni speranza*, but it depended entirely upon the popular view of the movement as some kind of collective inchoate yearning for “fulfillment” or “self expression,” a yearning absolutely devoid of ideas and therefore of any but the most pro forma benevolent interest. In fact there was an idea, and the idea was Marxist, and it was precisely to the extent that there was this Marxist idea that the curious historical anomaly known as the women's movement would have seemed to have any interest at all.

Marxism in this country had ever been an eccentric and quixotic passion. One oppressed class after an other had seemed finally to miss the point. The have-nots, it turned out, aspired mainly to having. The minorities seemed to promise more, but finally disappointed: it developed that they actually cared about the issues, that they tended to see the integration of the luncheonette and the seat in the front of the bus as real goals, and only rarely as ploys, counters in a larger game. They resisted that essential inductive leap from the immediate reform to the social ideal, and, just as disappointingly, they failed to perceive their common cause with other minorities, continued to exhibit a self-interest disconcerting in the extreme to organizers steeped in the rhetoric of “brotherhood.”

And then, at that exact dispirited moment when there seemed no one at all willing to play the proletariat, along came the women's movement, and the invention of women as a “class.” One could not help admiring the radical simplicity of this instant transfiguration. The notion that, in the absence of a cooperative proletariat, a revolutionary class might simply be invented, made up, “named” and so brought into existence, seemed at once so pragmatic and so visionary, so precisely Emersonian, that it took the breath away, exactly con firmed one's idea of where 19th-century transcendental instincts crossed with a late reading of Engels and Marx might lead. To read the theorists of the women's movement was to think not of Mary Wollstonecraft but of Margaret Fuller at her most high-minded, of rushing position papers off to mimeo and drinking tea from paper cups in lieu of eating lunch; of thin raincoats on bitter nights. If the family was the last fortress of capitalism, then let us abolish the family. If the necessity for conventional reproduction of the species seemed unfair to women, then let us transcend, via technology, “the very organization of nature,” the oppression, as Shulamith Firestone saw it, “that goes back through recorded

history to the animal kingdom itself." I accept the universe, Margaret Fuller had finally allowed: Shulamith Firestone did not.

It seemed very New England, this febrile and cerebral passion. The solemn a priori idealism in the guise of radical materialism somehow be spoke old-fashioned self-reliance and prudent sacrifice. The clumsy tor rents of words became a principle, a renunciation of style as unserious. The rhetorical willingness to break eggs became, in practice, only a thrifty capacity for finding the sermon in every stone. Burn the literature, Ti-Grace Atkinson said in effect when it was suggested that, even come the revolution, there would still be left the whole body of "sexist" Western literature.

But of course no books would be burned: the women of this movement were perfectly capable of craft ing didactic revisions of whatever apparently intractable material came to hand. "As a parent you should become an interpreter of myths," advised Letty Cottin Pogrebin in the preview issue of Ms. magazine. "Portions of any fairy tale or children's story can be salvaged during a critique session with your child."

Other literary analysts devised ways to salvage other books: Isabel Archer in "The Portrait of a Lady" need no longer be the victim of her own idealism. She could be, instead, the victim of a sexist society, a woman who had "internalized the conventional definition of wife." The narrator of Mary McCarthy's "The Company She Keeps" could be seen as "enslaved because she persists in looking for her identity in a man." Similarly, Miss McCarthy's "The Group" could serve to illustrate "what happens to women who have been educated at first-rate women's colleges—taught philosophy and his tory—and then are consigned to breast-feeding and gourmet cooking."

That fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women, nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology. They had invented a class; now they had only to make that class conscious. They seized as a political technique a kind of shared testimony at first called a "rap session," then called "consciousness-raising," and in any case a therapeutically-oriented American reinterpretation, according to the British feminist Juliet Mitchell, of a Chinese revolutionary practice known as "speaking bitterness." They purged and regrouped and purged again, worried out one another's errors and deviations, the "élitism" here, the "careerism" there.

It would have been merely sententious to call some of their thinking Stalinist: of course it was. It would have been pointless even to speak of whether one considered these women "right" or "wrong," meaningless to dwell upon the obvious, upon the coarsening of moral imagination to which such social idealism so often leads. To believe in "the greater good" is to operate, necessarily, in a certain ethical suspension. Ask any one committed to Marxist analysis how many angels dance on the head of a pin, and you will be asked in return to never mind the angels, tell me who controls the production of pins.

To those of us who remained committed mainly to the exploration of moral distinctions and ambiguities, the feminist analysis may have seemed a particularly narrow and cracked determinism. Nonetheless it was serious, and for these high strung idealists to find themselves out of the mimeo room and onto the Cavett Show must have been in certain ways more unsettling to them than it ever was to the viewers. They were being heard, and yet not really. Attention was finally being paid, and yet that attention was mired in the trivial. Even the brightest movement women found themselves engaged in sullen public colloquies about the in equities of dishwashing and the in tolerable humiliations of being ob served by construction workers on Sixth Avenue. (This grievance was not atypic in that discussion of it seemed always to take on unexplored Ms. Scarlett overtones, suggestions of fragile cultivated flowers being "spoken to," and therefore violated by uppity proles.)

They totted up the pans scoured, the towels picked off the bathroom floor, the loads of laundry done in a lifetime.

Cooking a meal could only be “dogwork,” and to claim any pleasure from it was evidence of craven acquiescence in one's own forced labor. Small children could only be odious mechanisms for the spilling and digesting of food, for robbing women of their “freedom.” It was a long way from Simone de Beauvoir's grave and awesome recognition of woman's role as “the Other” to the notion that the first step in changing that role was Alix Kates Shulman's marriage contract (“wife strips beds, husband remakes them”) reproduced in Ms.; but it was to ward just such trivialization that the women's movement seemed to be heading.

Of course this litany of trivia was crucial to the movement in the be ginning, a key technique in the politicizing of women who perhaps had been conditioned to obscure their resentments even from themselves. Mrs. Shulman's discovery that she had less time than her husband seemed to have was precisely the kind of chord the movement had hoped to strike in all women (the “click of recognition,” as Jane O'Reilly described it), but such discoveries could be of no use at all one refused to perceive the larger point, failed to make that inductive leap from the personal to the political.

Splitting up the week into hours during which the children were directed to address their “personal questions” to either one parent or another might or might not have improved the quality of Mr. and Mrs. Shulman's marriage, but the improvement of marriages would not a revolution make. It could be very useful to call housework, as Lenin did, “the most unproductive, the most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do,” but it could be useful only as the first step in a political process, only in the “awakening” of a class to its position, useful only as a metaphor to believe, during the late 1960's and early 1970's in the United. States of America, that the words had literal meaning was not only to stall the movement in the personal but to seriously delude one's self.

More and more, as the literature of the movement began to reflect the thinking of women who did not really understand the movement's ideological base, one had the sense of this stall, this delusion, the sense that the drilling of the theorists had struck only some psychic hardpan dense with superstitions and little sophistries, wish-fulfillment, self- loathing and bitter fancies. To read even desultorily in this literature was to recognize instantly a certain dolorous phantasm, an imagined Everywoman with whom the authors seemed to identify all too entirely.

This ubiquitous construct was everyone's victim but her own. She was persecuted even by her gynecologist, who made her beg in vain for contraceptives. She particularly need ed contraceptives because she was raped on every date, raped by her husband, and raped finally on the abortionist's table.

During the fashion for shoes with pointed toes, she, like “many women,” had her toes amputated. She was so intimidated by cosmetic advertising that she would sleep “huge portions” of her day in order to forestall wrinkling, and when awake she was enslaved by detergent commercials on television. She sent her child to a nursery school where the little girls huddled in a “doll corner,” and were forcibly re strained from playing with building blocks. Should she work, she was paid “three to ten times less” than an (always) unqualified man holding the same job, was prevented from attend ing business lunches because she would be “embarrassed” to appear in public with a man not her husband, and, when she traveled alone, faced a choice between humiliation in a restaurant and “eating a doughnut” in her hotel room.

The half-truths, repeated, authenticated themselves. The bitter fancies assumed their own logic. To ask the obvious— why she did not get herself another gynecologist, another job, why she did not get out of bed and turn off the television

set, or why, the most eccentric detail, she stayed in hotels where only doughnuts could be obtained from room service—was to join this argument at its own spooky level, a level which had only the most tenuous and unfortunate relationship to the actual condition of being a woman. That many women are victims of condescension and exploitation and sex-role stereotyping was scarcely news, but neither was it news that other women are not: nobody forces women to buy the package.

But of course something other than an objection to being "discriminated against" was at work here, something other than an aversion to being "stereotyped" in one's sex role.

Increasingly it seemed that the aversion was to adult sexual life itself: how much cleaner to stay forever children. One is constantly struck, in the accounts of lesbian relationships which appear from time to time in the movement literature, by the emphasis on the superior "tenderness" of the relationship, the "gentleness" of the sexual connection, as if the participants were wounded birds. The derogation of assertiveness as "machismo" has achieved such currency that one imagines several million women too delicate to deal with a man more overtly sexual than, say, David Cassidy. Just as one had gotten the unintended but in escapable suggestion, when told about the "terror and revulsion" experienced by women in the vicinity of construction sites, of creatures too "tender" for the abrasiveness of daily life, too fragile for the streets, so now one was getting, in the later literature of the movement, the impression of women too "sensitive" for the difficulties and ambiguities of adult life, women unequipped for reality and grasping at the movement as a rationale for denying that reality.

The transient stab of dread and loss which accompanies menstruation simply never happens: we only thought it happened because a male-chauvinist psychiatrist told us so. No woman need have bad dreams after an abortion: she has only been told she should. The power of sex is just an oppressive myth, no longer to be feared, because what the sexual connection really amounts to, we learn in one liberated woman's account of a postmarital affair, is "wisecracking and laughing" and "lying together and then leaping up to play and sing the entire Sesame Street Song book." All one's actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it — that sense of living one's deepest life under water, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death — could now be declared in valid, unnecessary, one never felt it at all.

One was only told it, and now one is to be reprogramed, fixed up, rendered again as in violate and unstained as the "modern" little girls in the Tampax advertisements. More and more we have been hearing the wishful voices of just such perpetual adolescents, the voices of women scarred by resentment not of their class position as women but at the failure of their childhood expectations and misapprehensions. "Nobody ever so much as mentioned" to Susan Edmiston "that when you say 'I do,' what you are doing is not, as you thought, vowing your eternal love, but rather subscribing to a whole system of rights, obligations and responsibilities that may well be anathema to your most cherished beliefs."

To Ellen Peck "the birth of children too often means the dissolution of romance, the loss of freedom, the abandonment of ideals to economics." A young woman described on the cover of a recent issue of New York magazine as "the Suburban Housewife Who Bought the Promises of Women's Lib and Came to the City to Live Them" tells us what promises she bought: "The chance to respond to the bright lights and civilization of the Big Apple, yes. The chance to compete, yes. But most of all, the chance to have some fun. Fun is what's been missing."

Eternal love, romance, fun. The Big Apple. These are relatively rare expectations in the arrangements of consenting adults, although not in those of children, and it wrenches the heart to read about these women in their brave new lives. An ex-wife and mother of three speaks of her plan "to play out my college girl's dream. I am going to New York to become this famous writer. Or this

working writer. Failing that, I will get a job in publishing." She mentions a friend, another young woman who "had never had any other life than as a daughter or wife or mother" but who is "just discovering herself to be a gifted potter." The childlike resourcefulness — to get a job in publishing, to be a gifted potter—bewilders the imagination.

The astral discontent with actual lives, actual men, the denial of the real ambiguities and the real generative or malignant possibilities of adult sexual life, somehow touches beyond words.

"It is the right of the oppressed to organize around their oppression as they see and de fine it," the movement theorists insist doggedly in an effort to solve the question of these women, to convince themselves that what is going on is still a political process; but the hand writing is already on the wall.

These are converts who want not a revolution but "romance," who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in exactly the mold of their old life. In certain ways they tell us sadder things about what the culture has done to them than the theorists ever did, and they also tell us, I suspect, that the women's movement is no longer a cause but a symptom ■

The following books were the basis of Joan Didion's reflections on the women's liberation movement.

THE SECOND SEX.
By Simone de Beauvoir. Alfred A. Knopf, cloth, $12.95. Bantam Books, paper, $1.25.

SEXUAL POLITICS.
By Kate Millett. Doubleday, cloth, $7.95. Avon-Equinox, paper,

$2.95.

THE FEMALE EUNUCH.
By Germaine Greer. McGraw-Hill, cloth, $6.95. Bantam

Books, paper, $1.95.

THE PRISONER OF SEX.
By Norman Mailer. Atlantic-Little, Brown, cloth, $5.95. NAL, paper, $1.25.

FEMINISM: The Essential Historical Writings.
Edited by Miriam Schneir. Random House, cloth, $7.95. Vintage Books, paper, $2.45.

THE SILENCED MAJORITY.
By Kirsten Amundsen. Prentice-Hall, cloth, $5.95; paper, $2.45.

REBIRTH OF FEMINISM.
By Judith Hole and Ellen Levine. Quadrangle Books. $10.

WOMAN IN A SEXIST SOCIETY.
Edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran. Basic Books, cloth, $12.50. Signet Books, paper, $1.95.

WOMAN'S ESTATE.
By Juliet Mitchell. Pantheon Books. $5.95.

A YOUNG WOMAN'S GUIDE TO LIBERATION.
By Karen De Crow. Bobbs-Merrill, cloth, $4.95. Pegasus, paper, $2.95.

THE DIALECTIC OF SEX: The Case for Feminist Revolution.
By Shulamith Firestone. William Morrow, cloth, $6.95. Bantam Books, paper, $1.25.

BORN FEMALE.
By Caroline Bird. David McKay, cloth, $6.95. Pocket Books, paper, $1.25.

OPEN SECRETS.
By Barbaralee Diamonstein. The Viking Press. $10.

NOTES FROM THE SECOND YEAR:
Women's Liberation - Major Writings of the Radical Feminist. Published by Notes (Box AA, Old Chelsea Station, New York, New York 10011). $1.50.

NOTES FROM THE THIRD YEAR:
Women's Liberation - Major Writings of the Radical Feminist. $1.50.